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Femininity Unveiled: Perspectives on the Protagonists of Medea and Trachiniae

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FEMININITY UNVEILED:
PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROTAGONISTS OF *MEDEA* AND *TRACHINIAE*

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ABSTRACT:

Why are two such controversial characters as Medea and Deianeira the protagonists in two plays in ancient Greek tragedy? This thesis analyzes the staging, actions, and speeches of these two women. It takes a closer look at expressions of femininity in each play. I argue that *Medea* and *Trachiniae* through a variety of expressions suggest that the audience take on an expanded understanding of femininity. The female protagonists of these two plays, despite their shocking actions, are neither condemned nor condoned for those actions. These female characters are presented as complex and fully human. They find themselves facing impossible dilemmas, and they cannot be confined to socially prescribed roles and behaviors for ancient Greek women.

The actions in Euripides' play *Medea* and in Sophocles' play *Trachiniae* are driven by female protagonists. Medea and the protagonist of *Trachiniae*—Deianeira—both appear on stage for the majority of the play. At the end of the plays, their actions—whether actively vindictive or simply misguided—cause the tragic endings of the stories. Yet these women, both of whom become murderesses, are not only given a stage on which to speak and act freely, they are also presented sympathetically.

Medea and Deianeira are two of the many female characters in Greek tragedy whose actions and words fall well outside the bounds of what would be considered proper actions and words for women in fifth century Athens. Antigone, Clytemnestra, and Hecuba are but a few of the other female characters on stage who also step outside Athenian women's traditional roles.

The prominence of female characters on the ancient Greek stage sparks an important question. If women were second-class citizens of Greek society, guarded and controlled by men, why are they so well represented and often so outspoken in Greek tragedy? This question is especially important in the case of female characters as controversial as Medea and Deianeira. Both have husbands who are unfaithful to them. In response, Medea takes revenge on Jason by destroying his household. She escapes in a chariot under the protection of the god Helios. Deianeira on the other hand attempts to bring her husband back to her, but instead her actions cause Heracles' death. In consternation, Deianeira ends her own life swiftly, while her husband dies a slow, painful death. Medea and Deianeira's stories are complex and multifaceted—just as the tragedies that feature them are also complex and multifaceted. The reasons for the prominence of female characters in these two plays merit an investigation.

One of the many explanations for the prominence of female characters in these male-authored works is that the 'women' are not functionally an end in themselves. They do not feature in the plays because they are women, nor because their stories are important. Rather, tragedy, including female characters in tragedy, exists for the education of men in the Athenian democracy. Female characters are invented by male authors and played by men on the tragic stage. They represent the "other": that which is not masculine. "When prominently represented, [women] may serve as anti-models as well as hidden models for that masculine self and concomitantly, their experience of suffering or their acts that lead them to disaster regularly occur before and precipitate those of men."[1] According to this view, the character Medea serves as a tool in Euripides' play. At the end, she reveals her true nature. By her escape in the god Helios' chariot, Medea demonstrates that she—a woman who makes compacts with men, who acts and speaks in a warrior-like manner, who defends her own honor—has no place in Greek society. She is not truly female; she is superhuman.[2] Her role is not to represent women, nor the injustices they suffer. Instead, she exacts justice on the oath-breaking Jason by destroying his household.

Trachiniae too can fit into this paradigm, where female characters serve as tools to explore masculine identity. The female protagonist Deianeira unintentionally commits actions which lead to the destruction of her husband. The consequences of her action are accidental. Her real purpose is to serve as the agent that causes the prophecy about Heracles' death to come true.[3] Although the chorus does not blame Deianeira for her

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[1] Zeitlin 347
[2] Zeitlin 348
[3] Zeitlin 347

mistake, Deianeira kills herself in despair. Her death occurs off stage. Even her son Hyllus' mourning for his mother occurs off stage. The audience learns of these events in a speech from the household nurse. Heracles, on the other hand, plays out his own suffering in full view of the audience. Heracles' fate, it may be argued, is the true tragedy of the play. Heracles, who has been poisoned, comes on stage, still alive and suffering. The audience witnesses his pain as well as the grief of the chorus and the grief of Heracles' son Hyllus. The great hero Heracles is reduced to a pitiful state. After Hyllus tells his dying father how and why Deianeira died, Heracles shows no more interest in Deianeira or in her fate. He is preoccupied with his own fate. The play, as it draws to a close, focuses entirely on Heracles. Deianeira and her troubles have served only to guide the events of the play to this point. In the end, it seems that Heracles' misfortune and downfall are more important than hers.

A different view of the prominence of Deianeira in *Trachiniae* is that the play represents an attempt to understand a woman's experience of life. Women's experiences—specifically their experience of marriage—seem to be an important theme in *Trachiniae*. This is clear from the frequent and extended reflections on marriage expressed by Deianeira and her friends in the female chorus. Even after Deianeira dies, the theme of marriage remains prominent. It is found no longer in the speeches of female characters, but in the symbolic way in which Heracles arrives in Trachis. His arrival in Trachis mirrors the arrival of a bride in procession. The robe which Heracles wears covers his body like a bride's veil. During this final scene on stage, the theme of marriage manifests itself in a reversal of gender roles. Deianeira kills herself with a sword and thus dies a masculine and warlike death. Her suffering is over, and she has left the stage. Her

presence, however, lingers in the form of the feminized and suffering Heracles. He dies helpless, weak, and groaning like a woman.

Deianeira, in this way of interpreting the play, is not just a tool to precipitate action for the men of the play. Rather she is a central character whose feminine suffering extends to her husband Heracles in the end. Deianeira is an example of the male author's attempt to represent femininity. She enters marriage as a passive bride. She was fought over as a maiden. She has been moved from one place to another like an object. Tragic women like Deianeira experience marriage as loss—loss of innocence and girlhood. Deianeira's married life too is passive. She describes it as the cultivation of a field. Heracles ploughs and seeds her. Thus through Deianeira's speeches to the chorus and later through Heracles' feminine-style suffering, *Trachiniae* explores a woman's experience of marriage. It may be that Heracles' suffering is the climax of the drama—that his suffering is more tragic and pitiful than Deianeira's; the strongest of the strong has become weaker than the weakest. Perhaps the image of a man suffering the way women suffer is more powerful and terrible to the audience. However, Heracles' suffering still mirrors the female experience of marriage and calls to mind Deianeira's laments earlier in the play about her own experiences as a maid and a bride.

Medea too draws to a close with a male character suffering. Medea appears like a superhuman: a tool for the punishment of the now-lamenting Jason. It feels as if the woman Medea is gone at the close of the play —just as Deianeira is gone at the end of *Trachiniae*. Medea now transcends the place of a mortal woman and steps into the role of a goddess. Yet Medea's godlike nature is not apparent until the very end of the play. In fact, Euripides takes care to emphasize Medea's human nature throughout most of the

play. From myths, Euripides' audience might have been familiar with Medea's ability to use magic, but Euripides downplays this aspect of Medea's character. When Medea reminds her husband Jason of all she has done for him, she never mentions magic. She only says that she saved Jason's life. Yes, she sends Jason's new wife a robe that eats away at the wearer's flesh. Was that robe forged by magic? It can be argued that Deianeira in *Trachiniae* possesses a very similar robe, and we know that Deianeira is not skilled in magic. The use of the word 'φάρμακα' (in this case meaning 'drugs' rather than poison or enchantment) does not imply any sorcery or magical skill to the possessor. Like Deianeira, Medea 'smears' the drug on the robe.[4] There is little in the play to indicate any magical activity. To all appearances, Medea stands on a level with the chorus—a simple woman like them. Also, Medea does not enact her revenge against Jason until she has the assurance of a safe haven in Athens. Even at the conclusion of the play, she does not use magic but escapes by the help of the god Helios. In short, throughout the majority of the play Medea is depicted as a human—as a woman—not as a powerful sorceress, nor as a deity. As a woman, Medea's character is nuanced. It cannot be defined by a single aspect or purpose.

Medea's behavior in Euripides' play ranges from the reasonable and sympathetic to the outrageous and violent. For much of the play her struggles and her victimhood present her as a sympathetic character. In other parts of the play, her actions are clearly intended to elicit horror from the chorus and from the audience. Such is the case when she murders her own children.

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[4] *Medea* line 789

Yet to assume that Medea's only purpose is to confirm male misogynistic and paternalistic beliefs about women's poor judgment and untrustworthiness would diminish both Medea and the intellectual capabilities of the spectators in fifth century Athens. Medea, with all her deceptions, laments, and personal conflicts, is as complex as her troubling situation is. Any spectators might recognize "analogies between [the characters'] experiences of mistreatment and inequality" and those in their own lives.[5] The evolving plot of the play would oblige an audience to develop and redevelop its opinions of its characters continually. In doing so an audience might entertain multiple perspectives or perhaps even split perspective at a given moment.[6] The audience of Euripides' play *Medea*, although aware of Medea's duplicity, might still be in awe of her bold and poignant statements about women's experiences in marriage. Likewise, at the close of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* an audience might keep in mind the deceased Deianeira and her sufferings, all the while watching Heracles' suffering.

Medea and Deianeira are multi-faceted characters within their respective plays—both in their roles for the action of the story and in the eyes of the audience. They act as agents for the fate of their husbands. They are also the feminine 'other' that contrasts with masculine identity in the plays. Yet, their characters are more complex than any one interpretation might suggest. Deianeira, abandoned by her husband, is forced to engage in masculine actions. Medea willingly adopts masculine roles to bring about her revenge. Heracles experiences bodily female sensations and female degradation through his suffering at the end of his play. Through all of these characters—their actions and experiences—the audience members expand their understanding of gender at the same

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[5] Mastronarde. 28
[6] Ibid; Griffith 73

time that they examine the tensions and inequalities of the genders. Being women neither limits Medea and Deianeira to specific realms within the play, nor does it preclude them from the sympathies of their audience.

An analysis of these two plays shows that they cannot satisfactorily be described by a single theory. Nor can a single aspect or theory satisfactorily define Medea or Deianeira as characters. A fifth century audience's view of the two female characters would have changed throughout the play.

In order to demonstrate this, I will discuss three aspects of Medea's and Deianeira's roles in their plays. First I will examine the overall presentation of these two characters on stage. For this analysis, I will discuss a few of the changing aspects of the protagonists' characters, including their reputations and interactions with other characters, the development of their roles over the course of the plays, their roles as wives, and their respective fates at the end of the two tragedies. Second, I will engage in a close analysis of the female characters' speech to further understand the way the women appeal to their audience. Finally, I will analyze the imagery of weddings and funerals that appears towards the end of the plays. Weddings and funerals both are domestic rituals in which women were heavily involved. In *Medea* and *Trachiniae*, the imagery of weddings and the imagery of funerals are often corrupted, conflated, or both. Far from being marginalized at the end of the plays, the issue of femininity which has permeated the plays becomes apparent in the pseudo-wedding and funeral imagery and its role reversals.

THE PROMINENCE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

Medea and *Trachiniae* each dedicate a considerable portion of stage time to developing and exploring their female protagonists. Both plays detail the two protagonists' life histories, roles, family backgrounds, as well as their relationships with people around them. The plays' respective female protagonists agonize over their troubles. They worry about their own fates and about the fates of their children. They express anger and resentment at current as well as at past events. They are at times deceptive and at other times honest and confiding. When they must act, both characters show resolve and determination. All these aspects of the protagonists' characters unfold on stage. They have thoughts, feelings, desires, and concerns that the audience can relate to.

Both plays open with female characters speaking. In fact, the women of the plays—protagonists, choruses, and the nurses—hold the center stage for a considerable time before the important male characters appear. Women's misfortunes are presented first and foremost. Medea and Deianeira speak at length about the troubles women face through their lives—mainly troubles related to marriage. The female characters' reflections on marriage encourage their audience to take an interest in the world of women.

Medea and Deianeira describe marriage almost exclusively as a source of grief and insult to women, from the beginning of the process—courtship—to a girl's removal from her childhood home into the home of her husband. The grief continues on through married life. For Medea and Deianeira specifically, their immediate problem is that their husbands have abandoned them for other women. Medea and Deianeira have both been

married for years. They have experienced the troubles that marriage brings women. However, despite their best efforts to make marriage work, their marriages have failed, and they are both abandoned. The two protagonists have different reactions to their abandonment: one is angry and vindictive; the other is resigned to the reality. Yet, both female characters are presented as genuine and at times sympathetic characters.

Euripides' and Sophocles' initial sympathetic tones towards and thorough treatments of the characters of Medea and Deianeira become all the more interesting in light of the death and destruction which both characters bring on their own households. Even so, their fatal deeds—whether intentional or unintentional—do not, according to the plays, define either Medea or Deianeira. As the two plays demonstrate, each character has her own complex story and circumstances that drive her to do what she does. In either play, no single aspect or deed defines the main character. Instead of simply demonizing these female characters who cause harm, the plays give them fair hearings—a chance to speak openly to the audience of their troubles and describe their feelings and intentions in response to their mistreatment. Furthermore both plays end in manners open to interpretation. Have the women been condemned? Have they received just or appropriate punishment for the damage they caused? The answers to these questions are uncertain. In contrast, the male characters who abandoned their wives lose all that is precious to them. Everything that they care about has been destroyed—knowingly or in ignorance—by the wives whom they chose to abandon.

PRESENTATION OF MEDEA

Medea is a foreign woman married to the Greek hero Jason. She and Jason live in Corinth. Both are in exile from their original homes. Medea has borne Jason two sons. She has been a faithful wife, yet Jason is not content with her. He has married a foreigner, and he feels unsatisfied with his social status. As a result, he secures a second marriage with the daughter of king Creon of Corinth. These events all occur before the start of the play.

Euripides' *Medea* opens with a monologue from the nurse of Medea's household. She is lamenting Medea's marriage, wishing it had never come to pass. The nurse says, "This is what most keeps a life free of trouble, when a woman is not at variance with her husband."[7] Yet she claims that Medea *has* lent all her support to Jason throughout their marriage.[8] The nurse's speech highlights the unfairness of Medea's situation. Medea has done everything right as a wife. But in the end, her effort is to no avail. Jason still abandons Medea.

The nurse's description of her mistress first shows Medea as a wronged and aggrieved wife. "She lies fasting, giving up her body to pain, spending in ceaseless weeping all the hours since she learned that she was wronged by her husband."[9] The nurse reminds the audience of Medea's position—cut off from her father and homeland. Jason's abandonment leaves her entirely destitute since she cannot turn to her natal family. However, Medea is more than just a grieving woman. The nurse goes on to say

[7] *Medea* (line 14); I use D. Kovacs' translation, occasionally modified.
[8] *Medea* (line 13)
[9] *Medea* (lines 24-26)

that she is afraid of her mistress. Medea, has "a terrible temper", and she "will not put up with bad treatment. I know her."[10]

The nurse and the teacher—both servants of Medea's household stand outside by the gates of the house, discussing their mistress' troubling plight. They are not the only ones who express concern for the abandoned wife. The chorus of Corinthian women arrives to inquire after Medea. The chorus leader says, "It is no joy I feel at this house's misfortunes since I have shared the cup of friendship with it."[11] Both before and after the chorus' arrival on stage, other characters can hear Medea's voice. Her offstage cries confirm the nurse's statements about her nature. Medea bemoans her unfortunate situation and curses all that pertains to her marriage—husband, children, and house. So wretched is her situation that she wishes for death.

From this beginning—the nurse's prologue, Medea's lamenting anapests, and the conversations between the household servants and the chorus, the audience learns of Medea's character and her reputation within the community. Medea is known to have a fierce temper. However, her neighbors like her. They call themselves her friends, they are troubled by her sorrow, and they wish to offer her consolation.

Then Medea enters the scene. In spite of Medea's outrage at Jason, he is not the main focus of her speech to the chorus. Instead, she speaks about the difficulties *all* women face when they enter into marriage. Like the nurse and the chorus, Euripides' audience might well have had prior knowledge of Medea through the myths about her that were common knowledge in Greek society. Yet even if any given members of the audience suspected subterfuge in Medea's speech, her speech must still have made an impression

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[10] *Medea* (lines 37-38)
[11] *Medea* (lines 136-137)

on them. Her speech is both striking in its statements and well crafted to garner sympathy from listeners. Medea focuses on the troubles she shares with the women around her: the troubles inherent in the institution of marriage. While it is true that Medea did not experience marriage in the conventional Greek way, the chorus still sympathizes with the familiar images she conjures up: that of "buying" a husband (an exaggerated reference to a woman's dowry), of encountering the strange customs of a husband's household, of learning how best to "deal with" a new husband, and of living in dread of incurring a husband's resentment. As a parting blow in this indictment of marriage, Medea adds: "Men say that we live a life free from danger at home while *they* fight with the spear. How wrong they are! I would rather stand three times with a shield than give birth once."[12] The statement serves as a poignant reminder of how perilous childbirth truly is for women. This statement—coupled with the assertion that "death is preferable" for a woman whose husband resents her[13]—displays women's married lives in a bleak light. According to Medea, women's lives are fraught with grief, struggle, and even great danger, just as much as a man's life may be. Medea exaggerates and slants her facts, yet the truth of what she says could not have escaped her audience. Certainly, the Corinthian women are moved by Medea's speech and agree to keep quiet while Medea takes her revenge on her husband. In fact, the chorus not only agrees to keep quiet but also says to Medea: "You will be justified in punishing your husband."[14]

In all her dealings with the other characters in the play, Medea appears clever and insightful. With the chorus, she appeals to the common troubles that women share. When

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[12] *Medea* (lines 248-251)
[13] *Medea* (line 243)
[14] *Medea* (line 267)

the king of Corinth arrives to banish Medea from his city, she changes her style and makes a formal supplication to him as his faithful subject. She appeals to his values as a king and a father. Skillfully, she is able to move even King Creon to allow her one more day's residence in Corinth. Medea readily understands her listeners and how best to influence each person or group she addresses.

Only after the play's female characters have conversed at length about the lots of women, and Medea is a well-established character on stage, does Jason arrive to defend his actions. He enters at line 446, about a third of the way through the play. Unlike Medea, Jason does not know how to appeal effectively to his conversational partners. His words have the desired effect neither on Medea nor on the listening chorus. Jason trivializes the aid Medea rendered him in the past. He does not believe that he owes Medea anything at this point. He has brought her to Greece out of a barbarian land, and she has 'won renown' among the Greeks. This ought to be enough for Medea. After all, for Jason there is nothing more important than fame among the Greeks. As he says at the end of his list of 'labors' (πόνων, ln 545), "Neither gold in my house nor the power to sing songs sweeter than Orpheus is my prayer without fame to grace my lot."[15] Jason remains preoccupied with his own concerns. He lacks the insight into his listeners' minds that Medea has.

Medea's response to Jason shows, perhaps for the first time in the play, her true feelings about her situation. She delivers an impassioned and accusatory speech in which she lists all of *her* labors on behalf of Jason. She takes credit for killing the fire breathing bulls and the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece. She reminds Jason that she

[15] *Medea* (lines 541-544)

abandoned her father and home just for him. She even murdered Jason's usurping uncle Pelias—also done out of love for Jason. And yet Jason betrays her with this new marriage.[16] She finishes with a bitter question: "Where am I now to turn?"[17] She has no one to help her and nowhere to go, for long ago, she estranged her family in order to be with Jason—her "wonderful and faithful" husband.[18] Medea's hopes for her children are dashed too. They, along with her, will be "wandering as beggars."[19] Jason has betrayed both Medea's faith in him, and the oaths she claims that he has made to her.

While other characters offer their sympathy to Medea, Jason meets with nobody's sympathy. The nurse states that because he is her master, she will *not* curse Jason (ὄλοιτο μὲν μή: δεσπότης γάρ ἐστ᾽ ἐμός). Yet it seems that she wants to curse him, since he is "guilty of disloyalty towards his loved ones."[20] The chorus also condemns Jason's actions, saying: "I think, even though it may be imprudent to say so, that in abandoning your wife you are not doing right."[21] The king of Athens, Aegeus, calls Jason's betrayal 'most shameful' (αἴσχιστον, ln. 358). Aegeus offers Medea refuge with him in Athens.

In addition to the bias that most characters show for Medea, the end of the play almost seems to vindicate her. This is a difficult task to accomplish, since Medea kills her own children in her war against Jason. Even so, at the close of the play Medea is clearly in control, not Jason. Despite her egregious deeds, Medea escapes the scene unhurt, via the assistance of a god, no less. She appears in the final lines of the play above the heads of everyone, in Helios' chariot. Jason remains on the ground, defeated, left in the

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[16] *Medea* (lines 465-498)
[17] *Medea* (line 502)
[18] *Medea* (lines 510-511)
[19] *Medea* (line 515)
[20] *Medea* (lines 82-84)
[21] *Medea* (lines 577-78)

wreckage of not one, but two destroyed households: bereft of Medea, bereft of his two sons, bereft of his new wife, without the possibility of future heirs. Jason loses that which is most dear to him: the royal marriage that bolstered his fame and the promise of royal children to carry on his glorious legacy.

A fifth century audience is undoubtedly aware of the seriousness of violating oaths, the crime which Medea has charged Jason with. In *Medea*, Jason receives justice for his inappropriate behavior and poor treatment of his loved ones. Yet, the character of Medea, it seems, also ought to pay a price for her murder of her own sons. Instead of receiving punishment, she departs, in her own words, to "go to the land of Erechtheus and live with Aegeus."[22] *Medea* leaves its audience to consider the problem it has presented: the violation of marriage and, in particular, the mistreatment of Medea—the wife. Medea with all that she represents—violated marriage, vengeance, child-murder—goes on to a new life. Monstrous though her deeds are, Medea appears as a complex character. She provides an intelligent audience opportunities for pondering the complexity of her story—both her circumstances and her actions. Although Medea has done the unthinkable, her bold statements about marriage and women's lots may still linger in audience members' minds. Her final appearance on stage, self-assured, powerful, and godlike, must have both shocked them and at the same time firmly held their attention.

The play truly does not end Medea's story. It concludes by inviting the audience to consider the future. Medea, with all the troubling concepts she embodies, departs for Athens. Her person and all that she represents have entered into the very city of the viewers.

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[22] *Medea* (lines 1384-1385)

PRESENTATION OF DEIANEIRA

Trachiniae appears to have the reverse effect on its audience. It does not ask audiences to consider a future for its protagonist, nor a future for any of its other characters. Although the future, in the form of a prophecy, features often during the story, it is a closed subject at the end of the play.

The prophecy is in the possession of Deianeira, wife of the Greek hero Heracles. Deianeira has borne Heracles many children. She has also managed his household in Trachis during his extended absences. His latest absence, however, is unusual. This time, Heracles has left his wife a tablet.[23] On a prophecy is written which projects Heracles' potential demise.[24] But, instead of receiving news that Heracles has died, Deianeira soon receives a young woman at her home. This young woman has been sent by a victorious Heracles as his trophy of war. It turns out that Heracles, like Jason, has acquired this woman as his new 'wife': Iole, the daughter of king Eurytus of Oechalia.[25] Heracles has taken Iole by force from her father, and since he needs to keep her somewhere safe, he sends her to his home.

Heracles' infidelity is not revealed right at the start of the play, but *Trachiniae* does, like *Medea*, open with a lament about the protagonist's marriage. In *Trachiniae,* the protagonist herself delivers the lament. Deianeira, although worried about the prophecy of Heracles' potential death, does not focus on her husband. She begins her monologue with a description of her experiences long ago in her father's house. First she speaks of

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[23] *Trachiniae* (lines 46-48); I use Lloyd Jones' translation, occasionally modified
[24] *Trachiniae* (lines 76-77, 79-81)
[25] *Trachiniae* (lines 380-381)

her experience of courtship, and then she speaks of her experience of what she perceives as the threat of marriage. These are fears common to many women. Deianeira fears not only marriage; before marriage, she feared the suitor Achelous who came to woo her.

Deianeira says that her sorrows have only continued after marriage. Now she lives in fear for her husband's fate, since he is always gone. She briefly tells the chorus about the prophecy of Heracles' death, which is written on the tablet he left her. However, Deianeira prefers to linger not on her husband's potentially impending death but on the details of her troubled marriage, and so do the women who surround her. Deianeira defines herself by her marriage, and the women of Trachis likewise describe her life and experiences in terms of her marriage.

In an ode, the chorus of Trachinian women reveals how Deianeira's suitors—Heracles and Achelous—battled for Deianeira's hand. The chorus describes Deianeira, who is watching the battle, as a lonely calf having left her mother.[26] Deianeira embodies this pitiful image of a young, lost, and frightened animal. She lives her life as a distant fearful spectator, a victim of men's wars. Following the choral ode, Deianeira reinforces this image. She tells the chorus how she watched Heracles kill the lustful centaur Nessus, her assailant. In the same way that Medea experienced marriage fraught with danger and grief, so does Deianeira. Achelous and Nessus are dangerous creatures—beasts rather than men—and Deianeira is prey for them. Although though she escapes these two creatures and potential bedmates, her married life is still troubling. Heracles takes her as his wife instead of the two bestial individuals, yet he leaves Deianeira for extended periods of time. She remains always at home worrying about his fate.

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[26] *Trachiniae* (lines 529-30)

At this point in the play Deianeira learns of Heracles' infidelity. Unlike Medea, she registers little surprise or outrage when she learns that her husband has taken another woman. For, as she says, "men were not born to enjoy the same delights forever."[27] Not only men are this way, in fact, but 'ἄνθρωποι'—all human beings. Deianeira implies that she and Heracles share this flaw. Deianeira therefore finds nothing shocking in Heracles' actions. She considers herself sexually inadequate—no longer interesting to her husband—and she does not seem to question Heracles' right to acquire elsewhere what she is not able to give him any more. Nonetheless, she considers the new woman her rival for Heracles' sexual interest. As she says to the chorus, "I am afraid that Heracles may be called my husband, but the younger woman's man."[28] Since she has defined her person by her marriage alone, she would feel a great loss if part of that relationship were taken from her.

Heracles' treatment of his wife inspires sympathy for Deianeira, just as Jason's actions generate sympathy for Medea. The chorus of Trachinian maidens sympathizes with Deianeira in her troubles. They approve of her plan to use a love potion and reclaim Heracles as her husband. They even go so far as to curse those who practice things in secret—as Heracles has done by taking this secret bedfellow into his home.[29] Aside from the chorus of women, Deianeira's sympathizers include the nurse, the messenger from the scene of Heracles' battle, and her son Hyllus. The messenger, most notably, also sympathizes with Deianeira's plight and feels that she has been unjustly treated. He

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[27] *Trachiniae* (lines 439-440)
[28] *Trachiniae* (lines 550-551)
[29] *Trachiniae* (lines 383-384)

deliberately seeks out Deianeira to tell her the truth of her situation and set straight the lies told to her by Heracles' herald Lichas.

In addition, Deianeira's reaction to the news of her husband's infidelity reveals a surprising side to her character. She does not, as might be expected, sit silently and submissively in the face of this insult, as she has passively endured most of the events that happen to her such as courtship and marriage. This time, she takes action to rectify the situation and save her marriage. Deianeira shows that she has not only the resolve to seek a solution for her problem, but she is also willing to deceive other people in order to achieve her ends. She has in her possession a robe which she smears with a love potion. She contrives a story which convinces Lichas to take the robe to Heracles. She tells Lichas that she made a vow to clothe her husband in a new robe when she heard of his safe return home. To confirm the authenticity of the robe, she gives Lichas her seal along with it.[30] The robe represents both Deianeira's deception and her lingering hopes for her marriage.

Deianeira shortly thereafter learns that her gift—the robe—has not done what she expected. Instead, it has poisoned her husband. In despair, Deianeira kills herself. After Deianeira's death, Heracles finally arrives on stage. While emotionally charged, Heracles part compared to Deianeira's is short. It begins well past the mid-point of the play—at line 972—when Heracles is carried on stage unconscious. He is wearing the robe Deianeira sent him. Deianeira's presence lingers on stage in the form of this robe—her final and fatal gift to her unfaithful husband.

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[30] *Trachinaie* (lines 610-615)

Heracles' part begins at line 984. He is half-senseless from the effects of the poison, as he does not know where he is—even what land he is in—and he wishes to die so his suffering may end.[31] Less than 300 lines of the play remain, and Heracles gives no justification for his treatment of Deianeira. Instead, his son Hyllus justifies Deianeira's actions. Hyllus explains that Deianeira caused Heracles death unknowingly and that her intentions were the best.[32]

Heracles' demise at the end of *Trachiniae* suggests that retributive justice has been meted out for the betraying husband. This justice is particularly poignant for several reasons. First, in Heracles' suffering, he loses that which is most important to him: the strength and prowess of his body—the body which he used to established dominance over others—including dominance over his wife. Heracles bemoans his ruined body in great detail. He speaks of the labors of his arms and of his back. He appeals to his now weakened body as he cries out in distress: "O hands, hands, O back and shoulders, O dear arms."[33]

In addition to the poetic justice of losing that which is most dear to him, Heracles' end may have appeared harsher to an Athenian audience than it would to most modern audiences. The Athenian audience would have known that in some versions of his myth, Heracles does not die but undergoes apotheosis and becomes immortal. Sophocles does not choose to end his play that way. In fact Sophocles does not even seem to allude to the possibility of apotheosis for Heracles. Heracles' complete ruin without honor instead may

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[31] *Trachiniae* lines (983-985, 1015-1016)
[32] *Trachiniae* (lines 1136)
[33] *Trachiniae* (lines 1089-1090)

imply a judgment on him for what he did. Like Jason, Heracles has committed an unacceptable act and must be punished.

Heracles' fate also contrasts ironically with that of his wife. Heracles bemoans that he has conquered so many monsters and villains in Greece, and now he suffers death at the hand of a woman. His lament puts into perspective how Deianeira's character has developed throughout the play. Deianeira, who began the play as a passive and diligent wife looking after her husband's household, ends the play as a bold agent who takes drastic action. At the end of the play, instead of defending herself against the accusation that she has murdered Heracles, Deianeira departs from the stage in silence. The last thing the audience hears about her, is that she has taken her own life with a sword—an action which the chorus marvels at: "And did a woman bring herself to do this with her own hand?" (καὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἔτλη τις χεὶρ γυναικεία κτίσαι;).[34] They seem to be as shocked that a *womanly* hand (χεὶρ γυναικεία) has brought about this deed as they are at the death itself. While Deianeira dies like a brave man, her husband Heracles suffers a slow and degrading death, weak and helpless.

Both members of the unhappy marriage in *Trachiniae* meet a terrible end, and one contrary to that expected from individuals of their respective genders and roles. Unlike the open and forward-looking—if unsettling—conclusion of *Medea*, there is no future in *Trachiniae.* There is no justification for what happens either. The last three lines of the play reflect on its events: "You have lately seen terrible deaths, and many sufferings

[34] *Trachiniae* (lines 898)

unprecedented, and none of these things is not Zeus."[35] These things have been allowed by the gods. There is no other explanation. The end of the play is as bleak and unsatisfying as Deianeira's experience of marriage has been.

As Medea and Deianeira tell them, the stories of their lives, marriages, and situations make them appear victimized and therefore sympathetic to the audience from the start. These characters' complicated problems, followed by their reactions, continue to make the two women interesting as the plays progress. Neither of the two can be relegated to the background of the plays as single-dimensional persons. Each develops her unique approach to her problems. Both characters are real and flawed, and their intentions change and waver as they try to resolve the issues they are faced with.

Whether justice has been served for Medea and Deianeira is debatable. Medea leaves Corinth, having killed several innocent individuals. She receives no punishment for her deeds. Even the gods let her go free. Deianeira, undeserving of death, dies undefended. There is no answer for why the events of *Trachiniae* occur as they do.

Yet the endings of *Medea* and *Trachiniae* are poetically just for the husbands. Both final scenes seem to reflect the nature of the marriages they put an end to. The female protagonists express unhappiness regarding their marriages early in the play. Their sentiments about their marriages—disappointment, frustration, and discontent—reflect in how the plays end. In the case of *Medea,* the play's end is conflicted and

[35] *Trachiniae* (lines 1276-1278); Manuscripts are divided over the ascription of these lines. They are spoken either by the chorus or by Hyllus. In either case, however, they reflect on the role of Zeus in all the events of the play. (Easterling 232)

troubled as Medea's marriage has been. *Trachiniae* in turn concludes with a desolate, bleak, and unsatisfying end, mirroring Deianeira's experience of marriage.

FEMALE CHARACTERS' APPEAL TO THE AUDIENCE

> πάντων δ' ὅσ' ἔστ' ἔμψυχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει
> γυναῖκές ἐσμεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν:
> Of all beings who are alive and have intelligence
> we women are the most unfortunate.[36]

Medea's tirade against marriage begins with these lines. She speaks these words to the Corinthian women. In her estimation, women are wretched, not only amongst all creatures that are animate (ἔμψυχος), but rather women are the most wretched of all those who have 'γνώμη'—intelligence. As Donald J. Mastronarde, author of the Cambridge commentary on *Medea*, states, it is crucial in this context that Medea adds the term 'γνώμην ἔχει'—'[to] have an intellectual faculty' to her statement. The term strengthens Medea's image of women's misery. Women are most unfortunate, because "[they] are not dumb beasts (who are also ἔμψυχα) but are fully aware of their mistreatment."[37] Following her bold statement, Medea launches into a recitation of the disadvantages that women have during their lives.

In the opening lines of *Trachiniae,* Deianeira expresses a similar sentiment. She herself lives a wretched life:

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[36] *Medea* (lines 230-231) Trans. Kovacs, modified
[37] Mastronarde 209

λόγος μέν ἐστ᾽ ἀρχαῖος ἀνθρώπων φανείς,
ὡς οὐκ ἂν αἰῶν᾽ ἐκμάθοις βροτῶν, πρὶν ἂν
θάνῃ τις, οὔτ᾽ εἰ χρηστὸς οὔτ᾽ εἴ τῳ κακός:
ἐγὼ δὲ τὸν ἐμόν, καὶ πρὶν εἰς Ἅιδου μολεῖν,
ἔξοιδ᾽ ἔχουσα δυστυχῆ τε καὶ βαρύν,
There is an ancient saying amongst men, once revealed to them
that you cannot understand a man's life before he is dead,
so as to know whether he has a good or bad one.
But I know well, even before going to Hades,
that the one I have is unfortunate and sorrowful.[38]

The word 'βροτός', refers not to males but rather to mortals—to both men and women. Deianeira obviously includes herself in this category as a mortal. However, she says that *she* does not need to wait until death to know that her life is wretched. Following these five lines, Deianeira describes the specific sorrows that have plagued her since her girlhood: beginning with her fears of suitors and continuing with her constant anxiety for her husband's welfare. Although Deianeira does not extend this status of wretchedness to all women as Medea does, she describes sorrows which would be familiar, in varying degrees, to all women who marry.

Medea and Deianeira both introduce themselves to their audiences with their own unique appeals. They identify themselves with their listeners. Deianeira groups herself in the category of all mortals (βροτῶν), and Medea places herself within the group of all animate (ἔμψυχος) beings—specifically those who have intelligence (γνώμη). Each protagonist seeks sympathy from her listeners.

On this foundation of common ground and sympathy, Medea and Deianeira build their cases and describe their particular sorrows. Medea responds to Jason's infidelity with outrage. Deianeira responds with resignation. However, although their reactions are different, both of them are determined to change their situations for the better. The fierce-

[38] *Trachiniae* (lines 1-5)

tempered Medea begins the play as a grieving, distraught woman, crushed by her husband's betrayal. During the course of the play she shows herself to be a clever and eloquent deceiver and tactician. She is bent on hurting Jason for his insult to her. Conflicting aspects of Medea's personality permeate the play. She is at once an avenging warrior and a mother. She wants to hurt Jason, but she does not want to harm her own children. She feels that there is no future for them after their father has abandoned them, but she loves them. Her choice is not an easy one.

Deianeira likewise is a multi-dimensional character. In the beginning of the play, she shows herself a diligent and modest wife, yet her words about her husband are already at this point resentful. Once she decides to win Heracles back, she becomes secretive and deceptive. She conceals her intent when she convinces Lichas to carry a robe to Heracles. Lichas knows nothing of the love-potion she has smeared on the cloak. He believes that he is simply bringing Heracles a new robe.

In their crises, Medea and Deianeira have the same problem: they are both losing their husbands. As each protagonist describes her predicament, it looks on the surface as if she blames the institution of marriage for all her woes. Medea's complaints begin broadly; she protests the practice of dowries; she complains that women must be 'prophets' to discern how best they must 'deal with' their husbands.[39] In a similar vein, Deianeira discusses the frightening suitor of her maidenhood and also the later fears that beset her as a wife. Both female characters indicate the possibility of—perhaps not happiness, but—a tolerable life for many women in marriage. This is, of course, a

[39] *Medea* (lines 232-234, 239-240)

possibility which they both have missed. Their point, however, is that a woman could live happily enough if she got a truly good husband.

With regard to the good husband, at the start of their marriages Medea and Deianeira both thought themselves well matched. These two protagonists' true misfortunes lie not in being married. Rather, their misfortunes lie in a misunderstanding. They have both misunderstood the way their husbands perceive marriage. Because Jason and Heracles view marriage very differently from Medea and Deianeira, both husbands fail to fulfill the roles that their wives consider not only appropriate, but obligatory for all husbands.

Medea and Deianeira describe marriage, not as a warm loving secure union with husband and children. Rather they use financial vocabulary to describe their experiences of marriage. They have both just realized that their husbands view marriage as a financial transaction. Once the transaction is complete—once the men have acquired their wives—t hey may set them aside, if they choose. When each husband does take a new wife, Medea and Deianeira place the blame where it belongs: solely on their husbands. In fact, no blame is put on the new 'wives'.

Women—by both Medea and Deianeira's descriptions of marriage—are purchasable goods: cargo. The princess, Jason's new wife, is only a means of buying social prestige for Jason. Iole—Heracles' new woman (whether wife or concubine)[40] is just another piece of merchandise Heracles has acquired. Wives are pawns in the hands of men. Medea and Deianeira therefore place the blame, not on these new wives, but on the

[40] Segal, *Bride or Concubine.*

husbands who brought them into their homes. The image of a woman as a purchasable and disposable good in a financial exchange is a pitiable and troubling one.

MEDEA'S SPEECH

While both female protagonists use financial vocabulary to discuss their situations, their descriptions of the 'marriage' transaction differ. Medea describes a woman's acquisition of a husband as a purchase. She turns the institution of marriage on its head by casting women in the active role as buyers of husbands.

> ἃς πρῶτα μὲν δεῖ χρημάτων ὑπερβολῇ
> πόσιν πρίασθαι, δεσπότην τε σώματος
> λαβεῖν […]
> κἀν τῷδ' ἀγὼν μέγιστος, ἢ κακὸν λαβεῖν
> ἢ χρηστόν:
> First at an exorbitant price we [women] must
> buy a husband and take a master for our bodies.
> […]
> and this is the greatest contest: whether we take a bad or
> good husband[41]

Marriage, thus, is a 'contest' (ἀγών), and a woman must compete to 'buy' not just a husband but a 'master for her body'. Medea's controversial description is tailored to inspire solidarity and support for her from the chorus. In order to obtain this support, she first slants marriage by implying that a woman has a choice in buying for herself a husband. As soon as the marriage transaction is completed, the tables are turned, and the woman is disenfranchised of her powers. She is then doubly insulted if she ends up with a bad husband. She not only had to pay for him; she made a bad purchase, and now she is trapped. She can neither return her purchase nor escape her new position as wife.

[41] *Medea* (lines 232-233, 235-236) Trans. Kovacs, modified

Medea's description of marriage in lines 232-236 depicts her own marriage, perhaps more than it depicts the typical marriage for an ancient Greek woman. Most Greek women's fathers would provide the dowry for their daughters. Medea truly paid her own dowry. The price Medea paid, however, was not in money but in estrangement from her homeland and from her family. In cutting her ties to her family, she has made herself dependent on her husband. No father would claim her if she were abandoned. The nurse's words at the start of the play say that Medea has lent Jason 'all her support'[42]—presumably Medea's actions to protect Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece. Medea's reflections from the above lines 232-236 are a sad commentary on all the effort she invested in her marriage, only to get a degrading return from a husband who is devoid of gratitude and who no longer respects his oaths. Embedded within Medea's harsh criticism is her realization that it would have been better for her if she had never met Jason.

Medea's description of a dowry as a woman's way of 'purchasing a man', describes her own experience in bitter and ironic terms. Her 'purchase' of Jason was a bad buy. However, her words also describe Jason's attitude towards marriage. Jason considers his marriage with Medea to be a transaction—a simple purchase—not a long-term obligation. Since she and Jason exchanged oaths and swore by the gods, Medea expects their marriage to be permanent. She is shocked and angered when Jason does not see it the same way. "I do not know," she says to Jason, "Whether you think that the gods of old no longer rule or that new ordinances have now been set up for mortals."[43] No rules have changed according to Medea: nothing has changed except Jason's behavior. Medea—through no fault of her own—has not been able to be Jason's wife in the way

[42] *Medea* (line 13)
[43] *Medea* (lines 492-494)

that she expected to be: a sharer of his trouble and a companion for life. Jason, in contrast, seems to consider himself bound to Medea only in a give-and-take relationship involving payment and return. He does not feel indebted to Medea, neither as a husband, nor as a result of all that Medea did for him at the beginning of their relationship. In fact, when Jason finally arrives on stage, he does not offer Medea exoneration or reinstatement; he offers her money:

> ἥκω, τὸ σὸν δὲ προσκοπούμενος, γύναι,
> ὡς μήτ᾽ ἀχρήμων σὺν τέκνοισιν ἐκπέσῃς
> μήτ᾽ ἐνδεής του:
> I have come here in your interests, woman,
> so that you might not go into exile with your children
> penniless or in need of anything.[44]

Jason intends this offer of money to be the final transaction of their relationship. He will pay Medea for her troubles and send her away with her children. The play's audience has just heard Medea's castigation of the marriage 'purchase'. Audiences would recognize that the monetary terms of Jason's offer are contemptible to Medea. She believes that their relationship is based on reciprocity and loyalty. Jason's attempt to appease her with money only reinforces her conviction that Jason has treated her poorly.

In her altercation with Jason, Medea's complaints echo her earlier sentiments. Jason is the most wicked of men, she tells him to his face. She has done everything she ought—including bearing his children: a task more terrible than standing in battle, as Medea said to the chorus earlier. "You are surely aware," she says to Jason, "That you have not kept your oath to me."[45] Jason has no right to terminate their relationship. The deeds she did for him and the oaths they exchanged bind them together for life. Their two sons are living proof of Jason's on-going obligations to her. Medea—as a woman—may

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[44] *Medea* (lines 460-462)
[45] *Medea* (line 495)

seem out of place in recalling oaths she made with Jason. To call up oaths as obligations—oaths which she and Jason swore to one another—indicates equality in their relationship, and such is out of place for an ancient Greek woman. Still, even with a woman as partner in a contractual agreement, a violation of oaths would be a grave offense, certainly to the woman in question, but also to the gods.

As a result of his oath breaking, Jason has sealed the fates of both the princess and of his children. *Medea* implies this in many ways. The deaths of the princess and children were not only necessary, they seem to be endorsed by the gods because of what Jason did. After their argument on stage, when Jason gives up and turns to leave, Medea speaks these parting words:

> ἴσως γάρ — σὺν θεῷ δ' εἰρήσεται —
> γαμεῖς τοιοῦτον ὥστε θρηνεῖσθαι γάμον.
> For perhaps—it will be said with the gods' favor—
> You are making a marriage that will cause you to lament.[46]

These words are bold. She brazenly calls on the gods to back up her assertion. Yet the words also prove prophetic. Jason's marriage brings him nothing but grief, and the gods *do* seem to endorse Medea's actions. Later in the play, Medea repeats her assertion, and she states once again that she has the gods' support. Medea sends her sons to Jason's new wife with gifts that (unbeknownst to the children) are poisoned. The princess thinks that the children have brought the gifts as a peace offering. Therefore she receives the children and accepts the gifts. When Medea hears that her exiled children have been received by the princess, she weeps. When asked why she weeps at the good news about her children, she replies: "I have every reason […] The gods, and I in my madness, have

[46] *Medea* (lines 625-626) Trans. Kovacs, modified

contrived it so."[47] She has already decided that she must kill her children. Both she and the gods have willed it so.

The women of the chorus echo Medea's sentiments. Jason's reprehensible second marriage *must* lead to grief for all involved. In lines 1233-1235, the chorus casts the blame for the children's and princess' deaths not on the murderess, but on the princess' marriage to Jason:

> παισὶν οὐ κατειδὼς
> ὄλεθρον βιοτᾷ προσάγεις ἀλόχῳ τε
> σᾷ στυγερὸν θάνατον.
> All unwitting you [Jason] bring
> destruction upon your children's life
> And upon your bride a dreadful death.[48]

It is not Medea but Jason who bring destruction on the innocents.[49] The chorus continues by lamenting the sorrows of the "unhappy mother of the children" even though they know that the unhappy mother intends to murder her own children. She means to kill her children, they say, because of her marriage bed.[50] Yet they grieve for her and sympathize with her.

As always, the characters of *Medea* cast blame on Jason. Jason's new wife is no more than collateral damage as a result of his crimes. And indeed, the gods do look favorably on Medea's prophetic statement that Jason's new marriage will cause him to weep. Medea receives no punishment for causing suffering to Jason, and she escapes with the assistance of a god.

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[47] *Medea* (lines 1013-1015)
[48] *Medea* (lines 992-994)
[49] In addition, the chorus reiterates this sentiment in lines 1233-1235. They say that the princess now goes down to the halls of Hades because of her marriage to Jason. However, most editors have rejected these three lines as a later addition to the text.
[50] *Medea* (lines 995-1000)

By her language as much as by her actions, Medea must have presented a bewildering persona for an audience to come to terms with. She "competes for honor, reputation, and revenge, and she lays claim to language and imagery from typically male spheres (military, athletic, political)."[51] She even describes marriage as a 'great contest' in which women compete to get a good husband. She murders four people, and the gods endorse her action. This vengeful action-centered Medea acts masculine. Yet at other times Medea acts as one would expect a woman of ancient Greece to act. She, a mother, is concerned for her children. She is an abandoned and mistreated wife. Like a good wife, she has spent her married life looking only to one person—her husband; she calls Jason "the man in whom all I had was bound up" (ἐν ᾧ γὰρ ἦν μοι πάντα).[52] He has wronged her even though she has done no wrong to deserve his treatment.[53] Medea reminds Jason of these roles she has assumed for his sake. In her last confrontation with Jason, Medea recalls her role as a victimized wife. "The gods know who struck the first blow," she says.[54] It was not *she* who did wrong. Jason violated their marriage first. What the audience thinks of her as she leaves the scene in her chariot with her dead children is impossible to say. Yet even to the very close of the play, Medea simultaneously claims all of her roles—the conventional and the controversial alike. She cannot be described either as a straightforward and detestable villain nor simply as a victimized woman.

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[51] Mastronarde 27
[52] *Medea* (line 228)
[53] *Medea* (line 692)
[54] *Medea* (line 1372)

DEIANEIRA'S SPEECH

Like Medea, Deianeira experiences disillusionment with her marriage. At the start of her marriage Deianeira imagined that she had a good husband. She soon finds, however, that he is never home. During the play, she realizes that she is not just a neglected wife; she is an easily replaced wife. Heracles has acquired a new commodity: the young girl Iole.

Deianeira's language about marriage also employs financial vocabulary. Deianeira, like Medea, recognizes that Heracles considers marriage a transaction and not a long-term obligation. She knows that women are objects that Heracles likes to possess for himself. When he grows tired of one possession, Heracles will acquire another woman if he feels like it. Deianeira expresses this understanding of marriage as she comments on Iole's arrival at her house. She describes Iole in language that establishes the girl as Heracles' new bride. First she defines Iole as cargo, cargo which Heracles has sent home to keep safe for later.

> κόρην γάρ, οἶμαι δ' οὐκέτ', ἀλλ' ἐζευγμένην,
> παρεισδέδεγμαι φόρτον ὥστε ναυτίλος,
> λωβητὸν ἐμπόλημα τῆς ἐμῆς φρενός.
> For I have taken in the maiden—but I think she is no maiden,
> but taken by [Heracles]—as a captain takes on cargo,
> a merchandise that does outrage to my feelings.[55]

Words like ζυγόν (yoke) and ἐζευγμένην (coming from the verb ζεύγνυμι—'to yoke') are commonly used when describing brides in ancient Greek society. Brides are often portrayed as animals which must be yoked.[56] Deianeira describes Iole as "yoked". Just as Heracles, when newly married to Deianeira, moved Deianeira to his home and left her

[55] *Trachiniae* (lines 536-538)
[56] Ormand 46

there, so now Heracles has just shipped Iole to his home. In short, Iole is no more than and no different from Deianeira.

In recognition of this, Deianeira neither blames Iole for her husband's infidelity, nor does she seem angry with this new paramour. As Deianeira says,

> ἐπεί σφ᾽ ἐγὼ
> ὤκτιρα δὴ μάλιστα προσβλέψασ᾽, ὅτι
> τὸ κάλλος αὐτῆς τὸν βίον διώλεσεν,
> I pitied her most of all when my eyes lit on her,
> because her beauty had destroyed her life. [57]

In short, Iole reminds Deianeira of herself, and Deianeira knows Iole to be a helpless pawn. Iole can no more determine her future and her position than Deianeira could as a young bride. Deianeira pities Iole as she pities herself. Yet Deianeira's persona as a submissive and mild woman stretches only so far. Her language regarding Heracles is not as understanding as her language about Iole.

While Deianeira is not as forthright as Medea in declaring her husband bad, neither is her portrayal of her husband positive. She complains that Heracles is 'always' (ἀεί) away from home. In fact, she has not heard from him for fifteen months.[58] His absence is a great source of anxiety for Deianeira. She continually nourishes fear after fear (ἀεί τιν᾽ ἐκ φόβου φόβον τρέφω),[59] worrying each time he leaves that something may happen to him and he may not return home, and she will be permanently abandoned. The chorus too casts the blame for Deianeira's wretchedness on Heracles' absence. Deianeira, they say, is "worn away on her anxious couch, bereft of [Heracles]" (ἐνθυμίοις εὐναῖς ἀνανδρώτοισι τρύχεσθαι).[60] Not only has Heracles left his wife desolate with her

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[57] *Trachiniae* (lines 463-465)
[58] *Trachiniae* (line 44-45)
[59] *Trachiniae* (line 28)
[60] *Trachiniae* (lines 109-110)

'husbandless' marriage bed—a widow for all intents and purposes; he has left her 'sharp pains' (πικρὰς ὠδῖνας)[61]—words often used to describe women's birth pangs. The statement is likely an indication of the many children she has borne Heracles, perhaps even in his absence. To top off these grievances Deianeira suffers from Heracles' constant absence, the prophecy, which Heracles left Deianeira on the tablet before his last departure now leaves her in constant fear that he may die before returning home.[62]

When Deianeira names the reasons for her husband's extended absence, she speaks in vague terms. Heracles is "serving someone" (λατρεύοντά τῳ), she tells the chorus.[63] She could have reminded them that Heracles was away performing his twelve labors for king Eurystheus, but she chooses not to. Instead, she gives no justification for his frequent and prolonged absences—she mentions neither that he must atone for past crimes, nor that he serves a specific king. Heracles is simply away, serving some distant and unnamed man. Why does she not justify his absence with a name or a backstory—or even say that his absence and his labor are involuntary? Perhaps she is ashamed of his reasons for being away. Perhaps Heracles *wants* to be away. Deianeira does not elaborate, and the audience will never know—at least not from Deianeira.

On many other occasions in the play, Deianeira leaves the details of Heracles' absences up for speculation. Heracles' reasons for being away may be unimportant to Deianeira. She focuses on what Heracles has left behind. It is not only herself whom Heracles abandons at home. He neglects his duties also, as a father.

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[61] *Trachiniae* (lines 41-42)
[62] *Trachiniae* (lines 79-81)
[63] *Trachiniae* (line 35)

κἀφύσαμεν δὴ παῖδας, οὓς κεῖνός ποτε,
γῆτης ὅπως ἄρουραν ἔκτοπον λαβών,
σπείρων μόνον προσεῖδε κἀξαμῶν ἅπαξ.
We had, indeed, children, whom he, like a
farmer who has taken over a remote piece of ploughland,
regards only when he sows and when he reaps.[64]

Greek tragedy often employs an agricultural metaphor for the begetting of children. In the context of Deianeira's marriage, the metaphor suggests a deliberate action on the part of Heracles. Heracles does not tend his own 'ploughland'. Once he seeds his land, he returns only to reap the plants at harvest; he receives the benefits of the field and does none of the hard work involved in weeding and nourishing it.

Deianeira's resentment towards her husband manifests itself openly in her complaints. Since he is away, she herself has to care for the entire household and raise the children—Heracles' seeds. The agricultural metaphor suggests that while Heracles is gone, Deianeira must do all the manual labor required to care for the ploughland—work which would traditionally belong to the man of the household. This implication of neglect would awaken sympathy in her listeners, since Deianeira, although wishing only to be a good and faithful wife, has been forced to perform tasks which belong to her absent husband. These works also add masculinity to her character.

When Iole arrives at her home, Deianeira's language takes a slightly sharper turn—one that expresses more open resentment. She says to the chorus:

τοιάδ' Ἡρακλῆς,
ὁ πιστὸς ἡμῖν κἀγαθὸς καλούμενος,
οἰκούρι' ἀντέπεμψε τοῦ μακροῦ χρόνου.
Such is the reward that Heracles,
The one who is called faithful and good to me,
Has sent me for having kept the house so long.[65]

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[64] *Trachiniae* (lines 31-33)
[65] *Trachiniae* (lines 540-542) Trans. Lloyd-Jones, modified

The second line carries an almost sneering tone. Heracles is *called* faithful and good "to me", and his reward to her is to send home a new wife—an incredible insult to an existing wife. Here, Deianeira's language describing Heracles in fact resembles Medea's when she describes Jason as a "wonderful and faithful husband" (θαυμαστὸν […] πόσιν καὶ πιστὸν).[66] In both cases, 'πιστός' can only be described as a bitter and sarcastic adjective to describe two husbands who have taken a second wife.

In Deianeira's case, her exclamation—"*such* is the reward", and sent from the husband who is "good to *me*"—demonstrates that she feels personally mistreated. Heracles has neglected *her*—the one who has done so much and who has done so well by him. For all of her work and care, he sends her "such a thing" (τοιάδ'). She refers here to Iole. The demonstrative pronoun τοιάδε is a non-specific reference to an object; in short, Iole is just a 'thing', and Sophocles' play emphasizes this by never letting her speak or act. When Deianeira refers to "such" a reward, she might mean either a negative or positive reward. This is obviously meant in irony, since, to have a husband's new wife or paramour sent to one's home can hardly be construed as a positive event for her. Accompanied by the rest of her sentence—where she calls her husband 'faithful' when he has sent her a second wife—the implications of the word "such" are clear. In return for her own faithful and good housekeeping, Deianeira is sent a replacement for herself; in short, she is dispensable. This comes as a particularly bitter sting, since Deianeira has waited long and dutifully for her husband to return (τοῦ μακροῦ χρόνου). Deianeira's frustration shows the audience that she is more than a meek and diligent wife. She feels

[66] *Medea* (lines 510-511)

her mistreatment keenly, and she resents it, as much as she tries to appear submissive to Heracles.

Still, Deianeira *does* desire to be a good and compliant wife, and she quickly moderates her bitter words. "I do not know how to be angry with my husband suffering many times from this malady," she says (ἐγὼ δὲ θυμοῦσθαι μὲν οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι/ νοσοῦντι κείνῳ πολλὰ τῇδε τῇ νόσῳ).[67] Heracles has been influenced by Eros: a god who can afflict anyone with lustful desires. No one can resist him. Deianeira has already admitted that Eros—the god who causes this malady—rules everyone, including herself.[68] Her retraction still comes almost too quickly. She assures the chorus that she does not blame Heracles. How could she? She reminds herself that "it is not honorable for a woman of sense to be angry" (οὐ γάρ […] ὀργαίνειν καλὸν γυναῖκα νοῦν ἔχουσαν).[69] Herein lies Deianeira's desire. She wishes to be a good woman—a woman of sense—a diligent wife. She does not wish to appear angry and resentful; she feels guilty for expressing her frustrations; yet the audience recognizes in Deianeira's wavering stances that it is difficult for her to remain calm and reasonable when she has suffered so deep an insult.

Moving beyond her conflicted feelings about her husband, Deianeira reveals to the chorus that she has a plan—a "means of remedying pain" (λυτήριον λώφημα). Here again, Deianeira steps outside the role of a placid wife and into an active role as an agent of change. She intends to win her husband back.

Although her attempt to repair her troubled marriage results in disaster, Deianeira leaves viewers with the sense that she is a good and sympathetic character. The audience

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[67] *Trachiniae* (lines 543-544) Trans. Lloyd Jones, modified
[68] *Trachiniae* (lines 441-444)
[69] *Trachiniae* (lines 552-553)

has seen that Deianeira desires only to have her husband back home with her. She neither wishes nor does any harm to Iole. She never intends harm to her husband either, despite the pain he has caused her. Deianeira is misguided, yet the audience knows that she is without evil intent. Towards the end of the play, when she hears of Heracles' fate at her hands, Deianeira resolves instantly that she will die with her husband. It is not difficult to imagine that the audience would sympathize with her plight and also mourn how terribly she has been mistreated.

Deianeira has watched over a household for many years, struggling to do a wife's tasks as well as those she feels that Heracles ought to have overseen. She has waited patiently. But Heracles' imminent return does not bring her the joy she hoped for. With his impending arrival, Heracles sends home his second bride. Her sorrow, disappointment—even her veiled resentment—are understandable. Her failed attempt to remedy the problem is pitiable, and her death is tragic, especially since it follows so troubled and unfulfilled a life.

Medea and Deianeira's responses to disgrace and insults are intricate. They face complicated problems and express a variety of feelings, which the audience can likely relate to. Audience members need not condone the women's reactions in order to have sympathy for them. Evidence in both plays—sympathy for the female characters, ruin for the husbands, and the corrupted ritual images surrounding the marriages—suggests that audiences were led to feel disapproval for the husbands. Regarding protagonists and their actions, the audience's feelings were likely mixed. The foolish and misguided Deianeira, as well as the flawed and morally questionable Medea, would command from the

audience a range of feelings including sympathy, despair, disbelief, and at times indignation on their behalf.

The crux of the tragic actions in both *Medea* and *Trachiniae* stems from one problem: husbands abandoning their wives. In response, both women send gifts, one sending a gift to her husband's new wife, the other sending her gift to her husband. Medea's gift is meant to kill, and Deianeira's gift is meant to heal. Regardless of the intention, both gifts directly or indirectly destroy the husband's most treasured possession. Medea sends a robe to Jason's new wife; Jason's new prize—the princess—is destroyed, and with her Jason's hopes for fame. Deianeira, in hopes of getting her husband back, sends Heracles a robe. That robe inadvertently destroys Heracles' powerful body.

This gift giving of fine attire brings to mind marriage rites. However, these rites quickly devolve into their antithesis: funerals. The robes are but one example of disturbing wedding and funeral imagery within *Medea* and *Trachiniae*. These instances of ritual corruption (such as a wedding turning into a funeral) reflect the notion that the marriages presented within the plays are not only troubled and twisted, but doomed.

Imagery of Weddings and Funerals

Processions, gifts, and the symbolic unveiling of the bride are among the many rituals to which both plays refer. In *Medea* and *Trachiniae,* they are not the usual happy wedding images one would expect to see. They are, instead, misplaced, inappropriate, or twisted images of familiar rituals, and they feel eerie and uncomfortable for the audience.

These corrupted reflections of wedding rites appear most prominently towards the ends of the plays. Audiences have already witnessed the protagonists' complaints against marriage and against their husbands. They have likewise heard of the disappointments Medea and Deianeira have suffered. They have seen the two protagonists' marriages collapse. Just like the two marriages, the wedding imagery turns out to be corrupted as well.

In *Medea*, Jason's second marriage with the Corinthian princess presumably took place before the opening of the play. The wedding soon devolves into a funeral as the poisoned wedding gifts—fatal like the wedding itself—destroy the princess and become her funeral garments. Even the funeral imagery in that scene is frustrated. Jason, who began the day celebrating his wedding, faces four deaths, and at the very end he is not even allowed to perform the funeral rites for his own children.

Trachiniae presents almost the reverse situation. It shows wedding imagery incorporated into a funereal scene, rather than wedding rites devolving into a funeral. Heracles has sent his new 'bride'—Iole—back to his home, and Deianeira has sent him in return a robe smeared with a 'love potion'. Heracles' fateful end follows soon after. The robe, which was smeared, not with a love potion but with the blood of the centaur Nessus, becomes Heracles' funeral garment. Poisoned by his wife's gift, the dying Heracles returns to Trachis in procession with a "party of strangers" who carry him "as though caring for one dear to them."[70] This procession resembles both a wedding procession and a funeral procession. Ironically, as Heracles dies, echoes of his wedding

[70] *Trachiniae* (lines 965-967)

appear—the wedding which he has dishonored. He arrives at the house, veiled by the robe, and calls himself "womanish" in nature.[71]

The wedding imagery that appears in these plays often reverses gender roles. In Heracles' case, he arrives like a bride in procession. Role reversals like this one, and like Medea's adoption of male characteristics, may indicate how badly damaged the marriage relationships in *Medea* and *Trachiniae* are. The protagonists complained that their husbands neglected their proper roles in the marriage. Now, the wives take on husbands' roles. Deianeira kills herself with a sword, and Heracles lies dying and helpless while he weeps like a woman. The result is catastrophic. By neglecting their appropriate gender roles, the men have destroyed their marriages—possibly even their households. Their marriages are over, and this is emphasized poetically by recasting wedding images as funeral images.

At the end of both plays, the attention shifts to the husbands, to the fates of Jason and Heracles. However, this focus on the fates of the men does not marginalize the female characters, nor their concerns, as it may first seem. A discerning audience will soon recognize that the grievances of the female characters are present in the troubling imagery in the closing scenes. As Segal writes regarding the fate of Heracles in *Trachiniae,* "transgression of the rights of the marriage bed turn back upon the transgressor."[72] Such is also the case for Jason in *Medea.* Both Jason and Heracles receive retributive justice for their mistreatment of their wives.

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[71] *Trachiniae* (line 1075)
[72] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage*. 63

WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS IN *MEDEA*

Medea orchestrates the ceremonial events of the play in order to take revenge on Jason. It is difficult at times to distinguish one set of ritual images in *Medea* from its opposite. Wedding and funeral images in the play go hand-in-hand; the princess' ceremony represents both events at once.

The first instance of what appears to be a ceremonial occasion is when Medea's children take gifts to the princess. Medea has at once prepared both a wedding and a funeral for her rival. She calls her gifts to the princess a dowry (φερναί) for the young bride.[73] The image of the children departing with the gifts in their hands may have resembled a wedding procession or perhaps the gift giving that usually would follow a wedding.[74] The children's exit appears joyful, and the gifts are rich and beautiful. Medea gives the princess a crown (στέφανος) and a robe (πέπλοι)—items which she says her grandfather Helios gave to his descendants.[75] Yet, to the chorus and the audience, the children process not only for the princess' funeral, but also for their own. Their return to their mother will mark their end.

These gifts serve a dual purpose. In Jason's eyes, Medea gives these heirlooms as a gesture of acceptance and peacemaking. Medea appears for the moment to be blessing Jason's new marriage by bestowing expensive gifts on the bride. Through these gifts, however, Medea implies a divine condemnation of the marriage. Helios' gifts will destroy the princess—the illegitimate bride. Medea uses the god to work with her in her

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[73] *Medea* (line 956)
[74] Rehm 103
[75] *Medea* (lines 954-955)

vengeance. When describing the gifts to Jason, Medea calls her gift 'raiment' (κόσμον).[76] However, when talking to herself, Medea adds: "already the crown is on [the princess'] head and the royal bride is perishing in the robe" (καὶ δὴ 'πὶ κρατὶ στέφανος, ἐν πέπλοισι δὲ νύμφη τύραννος ὄλλυται).[77] She calls the gifts a crown (στέφανος) and a robe (πέπλος). While these terms may indeed describe beautiful wedding gifts, they also have a dual meaning. Euripides used these same two words his play *Trojan Women* to describe funeral garments.[78] Medea has sent her children to clothe Jason's new bride for a funeral.

A while after the children's departure with the gifts, a messenger—a servant of Jason's—returns to report what happened to the princess after she received Medea's gifts. His speech describes the princess' death in detail. Initially, when the children arrive at the house, the new bride veils her eyes (προυκαλύψατ' ὄμματα). She does not want to see Medea's children , so she looks away and veils her face.[79] A new bride arriving at her husband's home normally would unveil her face in a ceremonial gesture known as the Anakalypteria. The verb in this sentence— προκαλύπτω—describes the opposite action—veiling rather than unveiling. The princess' response is ironic. Her eyes are covered, and she turns away. Yet Jason convinces her to turn back towards the children and accept their gifts. Here Jason again shows himself to be the cause of the princess' death, for although she turned aside from the deadly gifts, Jason is encouraging her to receive them. By the time he reports the story of the princess' death, the messenger is well aware of the intent of Medea's gifts. He too refers to the gifts as a crown and a robe, using the very same words (στέφανος and πέπλος), which Medea used when speaking of

[76] *Medea* (lines 951, 954, 972)
[77] *Medea* (lines 1065-1066)
[78] *Troades* (lines 1143-44, 1220, 1223)
[79] *Medea* (line 1147)

the gifts to herself—words used for the duality of their meaning, since they can indicate either wedding or funeral garments.

At Jason's encouragement, the princess accepts Medea's gifts. She is delighted at the fine robe and crown and tries them on before a mirror. This scene is reminiscent of bridal preparations depicted on contemporary Athenian vases.[80] As she looks in the mirror, she becomes, in the messenger's words, a 'lifeless image' (ἄψυχον εἰκὼ) as she admires her new raiment.[81] The description of her figure in the mirror foreshadows her doom.

The poison begins to work, and the princess collapses. A servant, who misunderstands what is going on, believes that a divine frenzy has come over the princess. In joy, the servant raises a 'festal shout' to the gods.[82] In this way, the bride, ironically, begins her death convulsions with a cry of joy from a household servant. Medea's gift, the crown, then shoots forth flames. The princess runs through the house, trying to shake off her crown, but in the same way that a woman after her wedding cannot escape her marriage, she cannot remove the crown. Both crown and robe cling to her—the crown blazing up like a torch and the robe consuming her flesh. The messenger, who is recounting the tale to Medea, says that the princess' flesh "dropped from her bones like resin from a pine torch" (σάρκες δ' ἀπ' ὀστέων ὥστε πεύκινον δάκρυ… ἀπέρρεον).[83]

The pine torch is another symbol of marriage. In other plays, Euripides refers to the pine torch as a nuptial torch. For example, in *Alcestis.* Admetus speaks of his wedding: "Once I entered [my house] with pine torches from Mount Pelion and bridal

[80] Rehm, pg. 104
[81] *Medea* (line 1162)
[82] *Medea* (lines 1171-1173)
[83] *Medea* (line 1200-1201)

songs, holding the hand of my dear wife."[84] The princess in *Medea* becomes her own nuptial torch. The flames, which should have burned in celebration of her marriage, instead consume her. It appears as if there is a judgment on the marriage itself. After all, Jason's second marriage was corrupt from the start because it violated the oaths he had made with another woman. Instead of bringing the couple joy, the marriage destroys the princess and ruins everything that Jason cares for.

Jason seeks out Medea. He is both enraged and distraught. But this encounter only makes things worse. His children too are dead. Medea has killed them. Without his bride, without his children, and unable to take revenge on the godlike figure of Medea who is hovering above his head, Jason makes one last plea: "Allow me to bury these dead children and to mourn them."[85] But this too is denied him. Medea will not even let him touch his children.[86] The play culminates in this frustrated ritual. Jason expected to celebrate a wedding. The wedding gives way only to funerals. And at that, Jason is not even allowed to undertake the burial rites for any of them. He cannot touch his children, because they are carried away from him by Medea. He cannot touch his new bride—the princess—because anyone who touches her will also be destroyed by the poisoned robe, as the princess' father Creon was destroyed when he touched his daughter.[87] Jason destroyed all that Medea had. Now, she has destroyed all that Jason had. She has even destroyed his chance of conducting proper burial for his loved ones. His wedding has been forged into a funeral, and the funeral cannot be completed.

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[84] *Alcestis* (line 915) Trans. David Kovacs.
[85] *Medea* (line 1377)
[86] *Medea* (lines 1402-1404)
[87] *Medea* (lines 1211-1221)

The conclusion of *Medea* likely left its audience shocked and horrified, perhaps even frustrated like Jason. Yet in all the action of *Medea* there is a driving force. As Mastronarde writes: "The final impression of this drama is morally disquieting, but this is not the result of a godless world."[88] Medea leaves the stage in the sun god's chariot. She is above the grief and anger of the people on the earth, safe and untouched. It seems that the gods are with her.

WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS IN *TRACHINIAE*

Trachiniae, in contrast, ends, not so much in a shocking way, as in an unsatisfying way. The gods make no appearance in *Trachiniae*, even though Heracles is the son of Zeus. Despite his divine and powerful bloodline, to say nothing of his famous deeds, Heracles' masculinity comes into question at the close of the play. The gender roles between him and Deianeira are gravely confused. This reversal of roles calls to mind Deianeira's earlier complaints in the play that Heracles has not filled his appropriate place as the man of her household.

Because Heracles is absent so much of the time, Deianeira is driven to a blatant action of gender role reversal. By arranging to send a robe—a gift—to her husband Heracles, she takes on the masculine role in the marriage ceremony, acting as if she—the woman—is bestowing marriage gifts for his illicit marriage with Iole.[89] Her description of herself at home and awaiting Heracles also contains elements more masculine than feminine. She seems to suggest that *she* has 'tended Heracles' ploughland', and she

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[88] Mastronarde 34
[89] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage*. 79

expresses longing (πόθος) for her husband—a sentiment which as a modest woman she ought not express.[90]

Deianeira's masculine acts culminate with her suicide. After she sees her son preparing a litter for his father—who is either ailing or dying; she does not know—Deianeira goes into her marriage chamber and prepares the bed as a woman might prepare a bed for the night of the homecoming of her husband. She spreads blankets on the bed, and she then loosens her robe as a bride would on her wedding night.[91] Her next action, however, is not that of a bride. After speaking aloud a farewell to the marriage bed—the 'husbandless' bed, as the chorus puts it[92]—Deianeira penetrates herself with a sword. In the absence of her husband, she figuratively consummates the marriage one last time on her marriage bed. She does so with her own hand, and she dies on the bed she has shared with Heracles all her married life. Alone on her bed, Deianeira one last time intensifies the image of herself as a lonely wife, always without her husband, at the same time that she finishes yet another task which Heracles has so rarely been present to do.

Heracles, in contrast, takes on the role of a woman during these last lines of the play. His destruction begins, like the princess' death, with a scene of joyful ceremony. Hyllus, Heracles' son, was sent to search for his father. He found Heracles just as Deianeira's gift arrived. He witnessed his father's suffering on account of that robe. Hyllus describes to Deianeira how he first arrived at Cenaeum, where his father was sacrificing to the gods. He saw Heracles put on the robe Deianeira sent to him. At first,

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[90] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage*. 80
[91] *Trachiniae* (lines 923-931)
[92] *Trachiniae* (lines 109-110)

Heracles rejoices in the fine attire. In fact, he kills twelve bulls for the sacrifice while wearing the robe. Then the poison starts to take effect:

> ὅπως δὲ σεμνῶν ὀργίων ἐδαίετο
> φλὸξ αἱματηρὰ κἀπὸ πιείρας δρυός,
> ἱδρὼς ἀνῄει χρωτί, καὶ προσπτύσσεται
> πλευραῖσιν ἀρτίκολλος…
> But when the bloodshot flame from
> the sacred offerings and from the resinous pine blazed up,
> the sweat came upon his body, and [the robe] clung
> closely to his sides…[93]

Flames and pine resins appear in this play as well. Just as the princess died by flames, so also Heracles' death is caused by flames. The flames symbolize multiple meanings. They represent passion: Heracles' passion, which caused him to abandon his first marriage vows—a passion which is destructive and dangerous and which ultimately destroys him. As Heracles stands by the flames sacrificing bulls to the gods, he himself becomes the sacrifice—consumed by the flames and by the robe. The torches at the altar also bring to mind wedding imagery. The mention of 'resinous pine' recalls the pine torches which are used in wedding processions.[94]

After Deianeira's death, Heracles, who is significantly weakened from the effects of the poisoned robe, finally arrives in Trachis with his retinue. His body is veiled under the robe. He is veiled like a bride. In his final scene, he is a helpless veiled victim, in what resembles a wedding procession, but metamorphizes into a funeral procession with Heracles as the corpse. This is Heracles' procession towards his own death.

Through this suffering, Heracles perpetuates the image of himself as a woman and a bride. As soon as he arrives in Trachis, he regains his consciousness and pulls back the 'veil'—the poisoned robe – unveiling himself as a bride would. He says of his body: "I

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[93] *Trachiniae* (lines 765-768)
[94] *Medea* (lines 1200)

will show it to you without a veil" (δείξω γὰρ τάδ᾽ ἐκ καλυμμάτων).[95] He asserts the following:

> καὶ τόδ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἂν εἷς ποτε
> τόνδ᾽ ἄνδρα φαίη πρόσθ᾽ ἰδεῖν δεδρακότα,
> ἀλλ᾽ ἀστένακτος αἰὲν εἰπόμην κακοῖς.
> νῦν δ᾽ ἐκ τοιούτου θῆλυς ηὕρημαι τάλας.
> And no one can say he saw this man
> do such a thing before,
> But though racked with torments I never would lament!
> But now such a thing has shown me as a womanish creature.[96]

Even Heracles admits that he no longer appears like the mighty hero of Greece he was before. He cries out and weeps like a girl. His pains, as described in the play, are intermittent. He endures "spasms and wrenching, insidious constrictions torturing his sides, burst of delirium, unbearable heat." His suffering is "equal to that of a woman in childbirth."[97] Heracles describes his own suffering with words reminiscent of feminine pain. He describes himself as "wracked by unceasing pains" (πεπονημένος ἀλλήκτοις ὀδύναις). Both words refer to female experience. 'ὀδύνη', while not exclusively used to describe female pain, was often used by poets and physicians to describe women's suffering in childbirth.[98] In addition, it resembles in sound the Greek word 'ὠδῖνες'—a word which most frequently described female birth pangs.[99] The phrase contains many indications that Heracles' suffering is feminine.

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[95] *Trachiniae* (line 1078)
[96] *Trachiniae* (lines 1073-1075)
[97] Loraux 40
[98] Loraux 32
[99] While etymologists are tempted to connect ὀδύνη with ὠδῖνες, the long initial vowel of ὠδ- has not been explained so far. Nevertheless, it is easy to believe that the similarity in sound between the two words would make a connection easy for listeners. (Beekes, s,v. ὠδίς)

Heracles' marriage has collapsed, and his life is now also collapsing. He exits life as if in labor—birthing his own death. "Deianeira thus becomes the agent who causes him to suffer time's changes, like a woman--in and through his body."[100]

This is the retributive justice that Heracles suffers for his violation of the marriage bed. While Deianeira dies by the sword –like a man—as Heracles would have preferred to do, Heracles is "forced to experience himself as feminine."[101] He dies wailing like a woman, suffering like a woman, weak like a woman, and, ironically, destroyed by a woman.

Trachiniae ends with a reminder that "none of these things is not Zeus."[102] There is no answer for why. They simply are. Deianeira has brought about what was meant to be: a pathetic, unsatisfying end for her husband. His fate mirrors Deianeira's life, which was equally pathetic and unsatisfying to her.

EXPRESSIONS OF FEMININITY: SPEECH, ACTION, AND IMAGERY

The plays *Medea* and *Trachiniae* both begin with laments about marriage, and they both end with mixed imagery of wedding and funeral ceremonies. Marital terms "frame and define the doom of all the major characters in the drama."[103] The tragic fates of Medea, Deianeira, and their husbands come about because of their marriages.

Wedding and funeral rites naturally involve all human beings, but these ceremonies in particular are associated with women and women's work. Women are the passive brides at wedding ceremonies, and women are the active lamenters and preparers

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[100] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage.* 66
[101] Ormand 59
[102] *Trachiniae* (line 1278)
[103] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage*. 88

of bodies for burial. At the end of *Medea* and *Trachiniae,* imagery of these two ceremonies therefore reinforces the roles of the female protagonists. Yet, while this mixed and twisted imagery indicates that there is corruption in marriage, it is difficult to establish exactly what it is in marriage that causes the corruption, as well as why women's roles are discussed alongside this troubling life-and-death imagery.

Medea and *Trachiniae* draw bleak pictures of marriage. It has been suggested that these negative images imply that the institution of marriage in fifth century Athens was inherently flawed. By showing that the social construction of marriage is somehow faulty, these plays may have challenged contemporary Athenian views of marriage. The plays portray marriage from a female point of view only, and that point of view is grim and unhappy. Weddings—intended to celebrate a union and the prospect of new life and children for the couple—turn to funerals. The weddings, which so grieve Medea and Deianeira, seem to indicate that the bride is going to her death.

Instead of leading to order and new life in the household as wedding ceremonies ought, and instead of bringing closure to life as funeral ceremonies are meant to do, the mixed wedding-funereal ceremonies in *Medea* and *Trachiniae* herald destruction and chaos, along with parting, pain, and frustration for the characters. The more twisted and macabre a familiar ceremony appears on stage, the more outraged the audience will likely feel. For instance, an audience might recognize the departure of Medea's children with gifts as a familiar procession for a wedding—a gift-giving procession. However, audience members also recognize inherent corruption in the procession. They know the fate of the bride who will receive those gifts. Instead of seeing a beautiful bride looking forward to the consummation of her union with her husband, a consummation that will

lead to new life, they see a woman who will soon be a corpse. Worse still, they know that this procession is a funeral procession for the children who bring the gifts. Likewise, in *Trachiniae* when the audience sees Heracles arrive on stage veiled like a bride, the audience likely recognizes the similarities between Heracles' appearance and the appearance of a newlywed woman. This scene embodies two types of corruption: Heracles looks like a bride about to be wed, and Heracles is about to die because of the robe that he is wearing. The feminization of Heracles is a reversal of his proper role as husband. He is no longer the dominant patriarchal figure who is famous for his deeds of strength and valor. He is weak and helpless: perhaps a fitting poetic end to the hero who left his wife weak and helpless while he was always away from home.

Marriages in *Medea* and *Trachiniae* destroy that which weddings were meant to expand and preserve: families. "Marriages and deaths, weddings and funerals are shifted and confused to provide experiences of *instability,* to shake the audience out of comforting notions of order and to challenge the accepted social and ideational norms."[104] After viewing marriage from such an unsettling perspective, the audience may be challenged to consider the problems associated with it, and perhaps even be inspired to consider how marriage in the real world could be changed and improved.

On the other hand, however shifted and confused the wedding-funeral imagery is, it is, in some scholars' views, not a condemnation of marriage. Rather the imagery of weddings and funerals may suggest that the conflicts in Medea's and Deianeira's marriages stem from other sources. Perhaps it is individuals who corrupt marriage. The tragic events of Euripides' *Medea* may be traced back to Medea and her thirst for

[104] Rehm 9

revenge. After all, her revenge is excessive. She is not content with killing Jason. Jason must stay alive and suffer for what he has done. In order to inflict as much pain on Jason as possible, Medea destroys the innocent people that Jason cares most about. Medea kills the princess, and she kills her own children, clearly a disproportionate response to the wrongs done to her. Likewise, in *Trachiniae* Deianeira's actions have also resulted in the corruption of her marriage. Deianeira is misguided and naïve. For example, she trusts the word of Nessus the centaur—a creature who tried to rape her when she was young. When this centaur is dying, he tells Deianeira that his blood will work as a love potion that will bring her husband back to her. Deianeira displays a complete lack of judgment in trusting the centaur's words. What woman would trust a creature that had previously tried to rape her? But she does trust him, and Heracles dies as a result of her misplaced trust. With these two accounts in mind, one might think that the female characters in the plays are the sole sources of marital trouble. One destroys her marriage by guile, the other by ignorance. Perhaps these plays blame women for the problems in marriage, rather than blaming the institution of marriage itself. Left to themselves and their own judgments, it seems that women cause damage and destruction in marriage, even when they—like Deianeira—do not intend to do so. Thus *Medea* and *Trachiniae* might be communicating that it is essential for husbands to maintain strong patriarchal control over their wives, lest terrible things should happen to the household.

And yet, the actions of these female protagonists are not the only reasons for the corruption of marriage. After all, had it not been for the husbands abandoning their wives, neither of the two female protagonists would have acted as they did. Jason and Heracles both violated their relationships with their wives. Their actions are condemned

on stage by multiple characters. Even Deianeira—who does not wish to sound angry with her husband—expresses resentment towards Heracles. Both Medea and Deianeira are deprived of their husbands--deprived of male guidance. What could they do but act on their own to try to solve their problems? In short, a fifth century Athenian audience might easily exempt the institution of marriage from blame, and instead blame the individuals inside the marriage. The husbands have abandoned their wives, and wives have responded to this abandonment with lack of proper judgment. Clearly, a marriage union can be no more perfect than the two individuals who cement the union. It could therefore be said that it is husbands and wives who cause the problems that destroy marriage, not the institution of marriage itself.

In yet another point of view it has been suggested that the plays neither blame nor absolve marriage. The plays are instead designed to explore human behaviors. The plays explore how humans live both within parameters set by the gods and also within parameters set by social institutions.[105] Deianeira, for example, spends a great deal of time exploring her anxieties—particularly her anxieties about courtship, about marriage, and about her husband. Via courtship, a fifth century woman obtains a spouse and via marriage a fifth century woman begets children. Deianeira has never had any control over her life—thanks to social institutions, which pre-determine what women must do and be all through life. First she must endure her suitors, then she must endure marriage. Deianeira is always alone, dreading whatever comes next.

Heracles' role in *Trachiniae* explores a husband's flaws as well: namely his lust, his lack of self-control, and his violent tendencies. The interplay between these two

[105] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage*. 90

roles—the husband's and the wife's—allows audiences to consider the balance of power and responsibility inside the household.[106] Sophocles depicts Deianeira as a woman who causes destruction by trying to act on her own. He likewise depicts Heracles as a man whose neglect of his wife combined with his lust for power brings grief and destruction to his household. Both husband and wife struggle with their situations, and react badly. Both may be blamed for the destruction of their household: Heracles chiefly so because he neglects his household, but Deianeira also because she inadvertently destroys her husband through poor choices. The ending scenes of the play reveal Deianeira's and Heracles' marital roles reversed—one acting the part of a man in the marriage rite of consummation, and the other appearing as a bride on stage. Likewise, in *Medea,* the ending scenes reveal the flaws of the married couple. Rituals become frustrated. Jason's wedding with the princess turns into a funeral. His children are dead, and he is denied even the closure of performing proper funeral rituals for his loved ones. Medea too is to blame for these destructive events. The conclusive death of their marriage is metaphorically witnessed through the death of the fruits of the marriage; their two young sons.

There is no doubt that tragedy explores human behavior and human interactions. Yet, in addition to that general aim, the wedding-turned-funeral rituals at the end of *Medea* and *Trachiniae* may suggest not just one message—like a clear and simple condemnation of marriage—but a variety of messages. Mastronarde observes that each member of the audience may go through a spectrum of perspectives on the very complex character of Medea throughout the play. Likewise, the imagery of weddings and

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[106] Segal. *Time, Oracles, and Marriage*. 90

funerals—conflated and confused as it is—may send a different message to each member of the audience, in terms of the poetic justice meted out to the characters.

The corrupted imagery in these plays does more than expand the audience's understanding of marriage. It also seeks to expand the audiences' understanding of femininity. At the end of the plays, the focus on stage supposedly turns to the husbands, since the female characters have left the stage. Deianeira has taken her life somewhere out of sight. In a sense, Medea too has left the stage. She is high above the stage, and she seems to be something different from a woman—a *deus ex machina.* She is standing in the place where a god would stand at the end of a play, speaking like a god. Yet as Medea speaks from her place above Jason's head, she still calls on her identity as a mortal. She repeats her complaints against Jason.[107] She also refuses his request to bury the children. She claims that they are dear to her—their mother—not to Jason.[108] This insistence on the part of Medea that she is still a wounded wife and a mother, this insistence on retaining her femininity, makes a powerful statement to the audience: Medea and her gruesome acts cannot be dismissed on the grounds that she is other than a woman, nor on the grounds that she is somehow an unnatural woman. If Medea could be dismissed as other than a woman or as unnatural, the audience might perhaps dismiss all that happened to her and all that she did as freakish events never to be repeated anywhere. But because Medea remains a woman and a mother, even at the end of the play, her complaints must be considered. Her actions, while extreme, are actions that a woman can commit if she has been pushed too far.

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[107] *Medea* (lines 1366, 1368)
[108] *Medea* (line 1397)

In *Trachiniae* Deianeira takes masculine action and kills herself by the sword. This role reversal where the wife acts like a man is mirrored shortly after Deianeira dies. Heracles, weakened by poison, declares himself to be womanish. In this marriage, the lines between what is male and what is female are blurred. Women can and do sometimes act like men. Men can and do sometimes act like women.

Like the mixed wedding and funeral imagery, femininity itself is, towards the end of both plays, shifted and confused. Medea becomes powerful and divine, while her husband stands helpless and defeated below; Deianeira dies a masculine death while her husband seemingly dies in labor pains. Female characters thus behave in ways unusual for women—in ways that may be uncomfortable for an audience to witness. Yet, the disturbing reality is that these female characters cannot be dismissed as unnatural or unwomanly aberrations. Throughout these plays, the female protagonists exhibit female characteristics. They emphasize and embrace their femininity—particularly their roles as wives and their roles as mothers. The plays may suggest that femininity cannot be defined by social institutions. Femininity expresses itself in different ways. A woman may act in a bold and masculine way and yet still be a woman. Like Deianeira, she may take her life into her own hands and die by the sword, yet she dies a wife in her husband's bed. She may even, like Medea, commit outrageous acts of violence—even murder of her own children—yet not reject her womanhood, nor her identity as a wife and a mother. Likewise, a man may have experiences that could be classified as female experiences, and yet remain masculine, as in the case of Heracles' 'womanish' behavior and labor pangs.

With this in mind, in *Medea* and *Trachiniae,* female characters are interesting in their own right—not just in their capacity as a cipher for men and masculinity. Femininity is a subject to be explored for its own sake. Through female characters, the plays may challenge audiences to ask themselves: 'What does it mean to be female?' and 'How is femininity expressed through the lives and experiences of different women?' On examination, female characters may exist in a broader sense than the audience first supposed. Females in tragedy are fully human. Both in tragedy and in the reality of fifth century Athens, women were more complex and varied than the social roles imposed on them may allow. Female characters in tragedy may at times exhibit male characteristics such as strength and independence. Strength and independence are character traits that human beings often need in order to survive, especially in the absence of other leadership. These plays show us that women can be warrior-like as well as vengeful and determined. Yet, male characteristics notwithstanding, women remain women. Female characters in tragedy, just like male characters, explore through conversations their views of ethics, religion, politics, and domestic life. They cannot be confined to narrow prescribed roles any more than the male characters can. Women—as they appear in these two plays—are complex human beings who are motivated by a myriad of desires, circumstances, experiences and thoughts.

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